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ABSTRACT

To examine how high-poverty schools in Florida can work to improve student performance, a study was made of the status of high-poverty schools and strategies that appear to be working. Data were from reviews of Florida Department of Education documents; visits to 27 schools; and surveys of principals, teachers, and parents. Schools serving a large percentage of children from low-income families have significantly lower test scores than schools serving a small percentage of these families. The challenges that face high-poverty schools include high student mobility, absenteeism, and disciplinary problems. A critical step toward improving performance is implementing high expectations for all students. Because of limited time, financial resources, and educational skills, low-income parents often have difficulty becoming active partners in their children's education. Limited parental involvement is a major obstacle to improved student performance. School principals who exhibit strong leadership behaviors and consistently focus on improving student performance can make a difference in academic performance. Some Florida school districts consider student performance in their evaluation of principals, but there is no legislative requirement that boards of education do so. Four appendixes contain the minimum performance requirements for critically low-achievement schools, a discussion of the ways some schools are meeting the challenges of high poverty, an account of schools visited, and the response from the Florida Department of Education to the report. (SLD)

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A Report On

Improving Student Performance in High-Poverty Schools

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June 1997

Office of Program Policy Analysis and Government Accountability

Report No. 96-86

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THE FLORIDA LEGISLATURE •• Abstract •• Report No. 96-86

Office of
Program Policy Analysis
and Government Accountability

John W. Turcotte, Director

June 1997

A Report on Improving Student Performance in High-Poverty Schools

- Schools serving a large percentage of children from low-income families have significantly lower student test scores than schools serving a small percentage of these students. Although high-poverty schools receive more resources per student, they face greater challenges to improving student performance. These challenges include high student mobility, absenteeism, and disciplinary problems.

- A critical step to improving student academic performance in high-poverty schools is implementing high expectations for all students. Some high-poverty schools in Florida have increased student performance by setting high expectations for their students. However, other high-poverty schools in Florida have been less successful in setting high expectations for student performance.

- Due to limitations of available time, financial resources, and educational skills, low-income parents often have difficulty becoming active partners in their children's education. Although some high-poverty schools have implemented strategies to involve parents, limited parental involvement is still a major obstacle to improved student performance.

- School principals who exhibit strong leadership behaviors and consistently focus on improving student performance can make a difference in the performance of high-poverty schools. While some Florida school districts have taken the initiative in considering student performance in their evaluation of principals, there is currently no legislative requirement that district school boards do so.

This project was conducted in accordance with applicable evaluation standards. Copies of this report may be obtained by telephone (904-488-0021 or 800-531-2477), by FAX (904-487-3804), in person (Claude Pepper Building, Room 312, 111 W. Madison St.), or by mail (OPPAGA Report Production, P.O. Box 1735, Tallahassee, FL 32302). Web site: http://www.state.fl.us/oppaga/

Project Conducted by:
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Jane Fletcher (487-9255)

The Florida Legislature

OFFICE OF PROGRAM POLICY ANALYSIS AND GOVERNMENT ACCOUNTABILITY

John W. Turcotte, Director

June 1997

The President of the Senate,
the Speaker of the House of Representatives,
and the Legislative Auditing Committee

I have directed that a review be made of Improving Student Performance in High-Poverty Schools. The results of this review are presented to you in this report. This review was made as a part of an ongoing program of performance auditing as mandated by Section 11.51(1), Florida Statutes. This review was conducted by Glenn Chavis, Linda Ward, Tim Elwell, and Charlie Barrett, under the supervision of Jane Fletcher.

We wish to express our appreciation to the staff of the Department of Education for their assistance.

Sincerely

John W. Turcotte
Director

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Abstract

Report No. 96-86

Improving Student Performance in High-Poverty Schools

- Schools serving a large percentage of children from low-income families have significantly lower student test scores than schools serving a small percentage of these students. Although high-poverty schools receive more resources per student, they face greater challenges to improving student performance. These challenges include high student mobility, absenteeism, and disciplinary problems.

- A critical step to improving student academic performance in high-poverty schools is implementing high expectations for all students. Some high-poverty schools in Florida have increased student performance by setting high expectations for their students. However, other high-poverty schools in Florida have been less successful in setting high expectations for student performance.

- Due to limitations of available time, financial resources, and educational skills, low-income parents often have difficulty becoming active partners in their children's education. Although some high-poverty schools have implemented strategies to involve parents, limited parental involvement is still a major obstacle to improved student performance.

- School principals who exhibit strong leadership behaviors and consistently focus on improving student performance can make a difference in the performance of high-poverty schools. While some Florida school districts have taken the initiative in considering student performance in their evaluation of principals, there is currently no legislative requirement that district school boards do so.

Introduction: Purpose and Scope

The Joint Legislative Auditing Committee, at the request of the House Education Committee, directed the Office of Program Policy Analysis and Government Accountability (OPPAGA) to examine how school systems can work to improve student performance. Our review focuses on schools serving a large percentage of children from low-income families because these schools show the greatest need to improve. Our review addresses the following questions:

- How do the performance, resources, and challenges of high-poverty schools compare to those of low-poverty schools?
- Can high-poverty schools improve student performance by setting high academic expectations for all students?
- What are the barriers to obtaining parental involvement in high-poverty schools?
- Can principals in high-poverty schools make a difference in improving student performance?

To examine the challenges facing high-poverty schools and to identify strategies that appear to be working to improve student performance, we analyzed Department of Education (DOE) data, visited 27 schools, and conducted surveys. We reviewed DOE data on all public schools in Florida, comparing high- and low-poverty schools on test scores, resource use, and selected student and staff indicators associated with student performance. We visited 27 high-poverty schools in five school districts (Broward, Dade, Hillsborough, Leon, and Orange). We conducted interviews with district and school staff, and parents about creating high expectations for students, parental involvement, and the role of the principal, in each school. In 21 of these schools, we collected survey information from principals and teachers on the same topics. Ten of the schools surveyed were on DOE's November 1995 critically low schools list and the remaining 11 were not. We characterized the schools on the November 1995 critically low schools list as lower-performing schools and the remaining 11 schools as higher-performing. [1]

[1] Of all 27 schools we visited, 16 were on DOE's November 1995 critically low list. Of those 16 schools, 15 increased one or more test scores enough so they were not designated as a critically low school on the November 1996 list.

Findings

1 Schools serving a large percentage of children from low-income families have significantly lower student test scores than schools serving smaller percentages of these students. Although high-poverty schools receive more resources per student, they face greater challenges to improving student performance. These challenges include high student mobility, absenteeism, and disciplinary problems.

Students in High-Poverty Schools Tend to Have Lower Academic Performance

Students at high-poverty schools are less likely than students at other schools to perform well academically. One indication of the impact of poverty is reflected in the number of high-poverty schools included in the Department of Education's lists of critically low schools published in November 1995 and November 1996. (Critically low schools are those whose students scored unacceptably low on six indicators of academic performance. See Appendix A for minimum performance criteria.) As shown in Exhibit 1, nearly all of the schools on these lists were high-poverty schools.[2]

Exhibit 1

Critically Low Schools Are Predominately High-Poverty Schools

Type of School	Number of Schools	Number of High Poverty Schools	Number in Highest Poverty Quartile
NOVEMBER 1995 - CRITICALLY LOW SCHOOLS			
Elementary Schools	116	115	106
Middle Schools	20	20	17
High Schools	22	19	9
Total	**158**	**154**	**132**
NOVEMBER 1996 - CRITICALLY LOW SCHOOLS			
Elementary Schools	61	61	59
Middle Schools	0	0	0
High Schools	10	9	5
Total	**71**	**70**	**64**

Source: Compiled by OPPAGA from Department of Education data

[2] High-poverty schools are defined as those schools above the median in the percentage of students eligible for free or reduced lunch. This percentage is widely used in education as a poverty indicator and it is the one used in this study. The indicator is considered more reliable at the elementary and middle school level than for high schools.

Challenges of High-Poverty Schools

Excessive Absences, Student Mobility, and Discipline Problems Hinder Student Performance in High-Poverty Schools

High-poverty schools face a number of challenges as they strive to improve student test performance. High-poverty schools have about twice the percentage of students with excessive absences (21 or more days) as low-poverty schools.[3] In addition, the student mobility rate in high-poverty elementary and middle schools is about double the rate in low-poverty elementary and middle schools.[4] (See Exhibit 2.) Excessive student absences and students enrolling in and withdrawing from a school during the year make learning more difficult for students and teaching more difficult for teachers. Furthermore, school safety and disciplinary problems are more prevalent in high-poverty than in low-poverty schools, particularly at the middle school level. In high-poverty middle schools, the rates of reported disciplinary incidents and out-of-school suspensions are nearly twice as high as the rates in low-poverty middle schools. Therefore, schools with attendance, mobility, disciplinary, and chronic safety problems have trouble maintaining environments conducive to learning.

Exhibit 2

High-Poverty Schools Face Greater Challenges Than Low-Poverty Schools

	Elementary Schools		Middle Schools		High Schools	
	POVERTY QUARTILE					
Indicators	Lowest n=376	Highest n=377	Lowest n=121	Highest n=121	Lowest n=85	Highest n=85
Students absent from school for 21+ days in school year	7%	14%	12%	22%	N/A	N/A
Student mobility rate (percent changing schools during year)	23%	46%	22%	40%	25%	37%
Disciplinary incidents per 100 students	1.3	5.5	14.0	28.0	14.1	19.2
In-school suspensions per 100 students	.7	1.6	12.0	20.0	11.3	16.6
Out-of-school suspensions per 100 students	.8	2.5	11.0	20.0	11.1	15.9

Source: Compiled by OPPAGA from Department of Education data

[3] This data analysis includes 2,333 elementary, middle, and high schools and excludes 218 schools that are exceptional student centers or alternative schools. The analysis also excludes 34 schools that are Pre-K centers or schools that have missing data.

[4] In some instances, student mobility rates have been increased by school district policies (e.g., changes in school attendance zones).

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High-Poverty Schools Do Receive Greater Funding Due to Higher Enrollments in Special Programs

Students in high-poverty schools also tend to have greater and costlier educational needs than students in low-poverty schools. As shown in Exhibit 3, 30% of the students in high-poverty elementary schools are in federal compensatory programs as compared to 1% in low-poverty schools.[5] At high-poverty middle and high schools, twice as many students are in drop-out prevention programs than those in low-poverty schools.

Exhibit 3
High-Poverty Schools Have More Students in Special Programs Than Low-Poverty Schools

	Elementary Schools		Middle Schools		High Schools	
	POVERTY QUARTILE					
Indicators	**Lowest n=376**	**Highest n=377**	**Lowest n=121**	**Highest n=121**	**Lowest n=85**	**Highest n=85**
Percent of students in drop-out prevention programs	1.9%	3.6%	9.8%	21.1%	9.9%	19.8%
Percent of students in English for Speakers of Other Languages (ESOL) programs	3.5%	15.4%	2.2%	7.6%	2.9%	5.7%
Percent of students in federal compensatory programs	1.0%	30.4%	N/A	N/A	N/A	N/A

Source: Compiled by OPPAGA from Department of Education data

Resources of High-Poverty Schools

Because their students have greater and more costly educational needs, high-poverty schools tend to receive money from additional sources and spend more per student than low-poverty schools. For example, schools receive more funding for students in drop-out prevention programs and federal compensatory programs than they receive for students in basic education programs. Because high-poverty schools have more students in these programs, they generally receive more funds than do low-poverty schools. As a result of the additional funds they receive from these programs and other state, federal, and local sources, these schools are generally able to spend more per student than low-poverty schools.[6] (See Exhibit 4.)

[5] Federal compensatory programs provide educational services to students who need extra assistance. Examples of these programs are Title I Basic and Migrant Education Programs.

[6] The 1995-96 median expenditure per student for at-risk programs in high-poverty middle schools was less than that for low-poverty middle schools.

Exhibit 4
High-Poverty Schools Spend More Per Student Than Low-Poverty Schools

	Elementary Schools		Middle Schools		High Schools	
	POVERTY QUARTILE					
Indicators	**Lowest** n=376	**Highest** n=377	**Lowest** n=121	**Highest** n=121	**Lowest** n=85	**Highest** n=85
Median school expenditure per unweighted FTE student - Regular	$3,622	$4,636	$3,583	$3,941	$4,069	$4,427
Median school expenditure per unweighted FTE student - At-Risk	4,511	4,963	5,001	4,743	4,890	5,484

Source: Compiled by OPPAGA from Department of Education data

High-poverty schools frequently use these resources to hire additional teachers and support staff. For example, a high-poverty elementary school with 1,000 students is likely to have 6 more teachers and 11 more support staff than a low-poverty school of similar size. Teacher and support staff levels are also greater in high-poverty high schools (see Exhibit 5).

Exhibit 5
High-Poverty Schools Have More Teachers and Support Staff Per Student Than Low-Poverty Schools

	Elementary Schools		Middle Schools		High Schools	
	POVERTY QUARTILE					
Indicators	**Lowest** n=376	**Highest** n=377	**Lowest** n=121	**Highest** n=121	**Lowest** n=85	**Highest** n=85
Teachers per 1,000 students	52	58	51	51	49	56
Professional staff (librarians, counselors) per 1,000 students	3.1	3.7	4.1	4.7	4.2	5.4
Support staff (aides, clerical, lunchroom) per 1,000 students	25	36	21	25	19	27

Source: Compiled by OPPAGA from Department of Education data

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Some Schools Are Using Funding in Creative Ways to Improve Performance

To meet the challenges associated with improving student academic performance, schools we visited are exploring creative ways to make more cost-effective use of their resources. These schools are using their fiscal, personnel, and time resources in a variety of ways to expand students' learning opportunities. For example, some have modified school schedules and class structures to make better use of existing resources. Appendix B contains more detailed examples of the ways in which high-poverty schools are seeking to augment or better use their resources.

Performance of High-Poverty Schools

Despite Greater Resources, Student Performance Lags in High-Poverty Schools

Despite the additional resources they receive and their efforts to better use these resources, high-poverty schools have been unable to bring their students to the same academic performance levels as low-poverty schools. As shown in Exhibit 6, students in high-poverty schools are much more likely to have lower standardized test scores than students in low-poverty schools. This occurs at the elementary, middle, and high school levels.

Exhibit 6
Students in High-Poverty Schools Score Lower on Standardized Tests Than Students in Low-Poverty Schools

	Elementary Schools 4th Grade		Middle Schools 8th Grade		High Schools 10th Grade	
	POVERTY QUARTILE					
Test Scores	Lowest n=376	Highest n=377	Lowest n=121	Highest n=121	Lowest n=85	Highest n=85
Reading Test - students with rank score of 25 or below [1]	13%	46%	12%	39%	17%	37%
Math Test - students with rank score of 25 or below	10%	30%	13%	38%	14%	31%
Florida Writes Test - students with score below 3	30%	62%	10%	25%	16%	26%

[1] The rank score is based on the National Percentile Rank (NPR) which allows comparison to national norm group. An NPR score of 25 indicates that a student's test score places him/her in the 25th percentile when compared to a national norm group.

Source: Compiled by OPPAGA from Department of Education data.

To address the needs of high-poverty schools, some states have developed funding formulas that provide additional funds to schools serving students from low-income families. High-poverty schools in these states receive additional funding for both low-income students and students with special educational needs. Florida's education funding formula does not currently include a factor that provides additional funds to school districts on the basis of poverty.

Simply Providing More Resources Is Unlikely to Solve Performance Problems

Studies have not clearly determined whether or how much additional resources would fulfill the educational needs of students in high-poverty schools or help them meet high performance standards. Although the Legislature could examine the issue of reallocating resources based on poverty, funding increases alone are not likely to bring about significant changes in the performance of students in high-poverty schools. If Florida's schools do not set high expectations for their students, increase parents' involvement in their children's education, and take steps to ensure school principals have good leadership skills, Florida is unlikely to decrease the performance gap between high- and low-poverty schools.

2 A critical step to improving student academic performance in high-poverty schools is implementing high expectations for all students. Some high-poverty schools in Florida have increased student performance by setting high expectations for their students. However, other high-poverty schools in Florida have been less successful in setting high expectations for student performance.

Florida Is Now Setting High Standards for Student Performance

Recent state and national efforts to create educational standards assume that students from both high- and low-poverty schools will meet the same high standards of learning. In May 1996, the Florida State Board of Education established the Sunshine State Standards for all students in the public schools. These standards provide specific guidelines for what every Florida public school student should know and be able to do at different grade levels. The Sunshine State Standards are "standards of excellence" rather than minimum competency standards. To meet these standards, all schools will have to put forth additional effort in educating Florida's students, and high-poverty schools will have to make greater gains in student performance than low-poverty schools.

Education studies support establishing high standards and acknowledge the importance of high standards for all students. Studies indicate that students in schools, including high-poverty schools, that set high learning expectations perform better than

students in schools that do not set such expectations. These studies also indicate that teachers must not only believe in the importance of setting high expectations for all students, they must also adopt behaviors consistent with these expectations. High expectation behaviors include pursuing the belief that all students can learn regardless of their backgrounds, providing a variety of instructional activities, and setting challenging standards for all students.

Some High-Poverty Schools Set High Expectations

High Performance Expectations Do Not Exist at All Schools

While teachers at the high-poverty schools we examined believe that setting high expectations has a positive effect on student performance, they also indicate that teacher behaviors at their school are not always consistent with high expectations. For example, teachers we surveyed indicated that the belief "that all students can learn, regardless of the student's home background," was not always typical at their school. At 8 of 21 schools we visited, less than half of the teachers indicated that this belief was typical. Without this belief, schools are less likely to initiate behaviors to support high expectations.

Schools That Set High Expectations Tend to Have Higher Student Performance

High-poverty schools we examined that establish high expectations tend to have higher-performing students than schools that do not set such expectations. In some of the schools we surveyed, a relatively high percentage of the teachers reported that their school's academic standards for all students are set at challenging levels. At both the middle and elementary levels, teachers at high performing schools believed that standards for all students are set at challenging levels more often than teachers at low performing schools. However, the percentage of teachers reporting the behavior as typical at their school was greatest for elementary schools, less for the middle schools, and least for the high schools. These differences appear to occur because teachers in the middle and high schools believe that their students enter their school less prepared than they should be and that their ability to help all students substantially improve performance is limited.

Some Schools Are Developing Strategies to Promote High Performance

The high-poverty schools that have implemented high expectations have developed strategies to promote high student performance. Teachers at these schools believe that all students can learn and can attain high academic performance regardless of their backgrounds. These teachers clearly exhibit this belief with their students and have developed various actions in their classrooms to help students learn. For example, one school abolished basic-level classes and requires students to take

advanced classes, and another school requires students to master 75% of standards before they can be promoted to the next level. Appendix C shows examples of the strategies and actions these schools have taken.

Difficulties in Setting High Expectations

Four Factors Hinder High Expectations in Some Schools

Some high-poverty schools we visited, however, continue to have difficulty in setting high expectations for student performance. Four factors appear to impede the ability of high-poverty schools to set these expectations.

- **Attitude of Limited Abilities**. Some principals, teachers, and parents may feel that students at high-poverty schools cannot reach state standards because of their backgrounds. They believe schools can help high-poverty students make incremental improvements in their performance but not enough to meet high standards.

- **Not Aware of Importance of Expectations**. Some principals and teachers in high-poverty schools are not aware of the importance of high expectations. These educators may not have had training in setting high expectations in their teacher preparation or in-service training programs.

- **Administrative Constraints**. Some school districts impose administrative constraints on principals and teachers that hinder schools from implementing high expectations. Some school districts limit the principal's authority in selecting teachers, and some districts retain a social promotion policy that limits teachers' ability to retain students who may not yet have met standards.

- **Lack of Accountability**. Principals and teachers have sometimes not been held accountable for student performance. Some schools have focused on shifting the blame for poor performance rather than making needed program changes to improve student performance.

Conclusions and Recommendations

Recent efforts to implement academic standards, such as the Sunshine State Standards, assume that all students, regardless of home background, can attain these standards. High-poverty schools that have set high academic expectations do better in

reaching high standards than schools that do not set these expectations.

While teachers at high-poverty schools we visited believe that setting high expectations has a positive effect on student performance, they also indicate that behaviors of teachers at their school are not always consistent with high expectations. Some teachers, principals, and parents appear to believe that their students have limited abilities due to their backgrounds and cannot meet high standards. Principals and teachers also may not be aware of the importance of setting high expectations, are under administrative constraints that limit their ability to implement high standards, or have never been held accountable for their students' performance. These factors may be reduced with adequate changes in teacher attitudes and administrative policies.

Attitudes Must Change If Performance Is to Improve

The attitudes of principals and teachers must change if high-poverty schools are to increase the implementation of behaviors consistent with high expectations. We recommend that the Department of Education work with school districts to develop in-service training programs for principals and teachers that recognize and teach the behaviors consistent with high expectations. In addition, we recommend that the Legislature require the Department of Education to review and modify teacher certification requirements to ensure teachers are trained in the importance and effects of establishing high expectations.

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3 Low-income parents often have difficulty becoming active partners in their child's education because of limited time, financial resources, and educational skills. Although some high-poverty schools have implemented strategies to involve parents, limited parental involvement is still a major obstacle to improved student performance.

Parental Involvement in Education Is an Important State Goal

In 1996, the Florida Legislature emphasized the role of parents in the education of children by creating a state education goal that focuses on parental involvement. Specifically, the Legislature directed "communities, school boards, and schools [to] provide opportunities for involving parents and guardians as active partners in achieving school improvement and education accountability." This goal, along with seven other state education goals established in 1991, provide the basis for Florida's System of School Improvement and Accountability.

The State Board of Education recently adopted guidelines for implementing this goal. These guidelines acknowledge the

importance of parental involvement across a wide range of activities. For example, one guideline provides that school administrators and staff are to provide a welcoming atmosphere and physical space for parental inclusion, while another addresses the parents' role to provide a home environment conducive to learning. However, the Board has established only one performance measure for the parental involvement goal: the extent to which parents become members of Advisory Councils (SACs). The State Board of Education has not yet established performance indicators for other types of parental involvement.

Types of Parental Involvement Important for Student Performance

As recognized by the state's parental involvement goal, different types of parental involvement are important for student achievement and school improvement. For example, parents can participate in their child's education through: (a) parenting and helping their children learn at home, (b) communicating with schools, (c) volunteering, and (d) participating in the schools' decision-making processes. Studies report that parenting, learning at home, and communicating with schools are most likely to affect student academic achievement. These types of parental involvement activities typically occur at home or away from formal meetings such as advisory councils.

Barriers to Parental Involvement in High-Poverty Schools

Several Barriers Exist to Parental involvement by Low Income Families

At the high-poverty schools we visited, teachers and principals said that lack of parental involvement is an obstacle to student performance. School staff expressed concerns about the parents' role in parenting, assisting in instruction, and learning at home. However, teachers and principals, as well as studies we reviewed, stress that the limited parental involvement is not due to a low-income parents' lack of concern but to barriers that make it difficult for them to participate in their children's education. These barriers include limited time, limited financial resources, cultural obstacles, and limited educational skills. At the same time, other barriers, such as lack of training in involving parents, may prevent schools from facilitating or obtaining adequate parental involvement. Exhibit 7 identifies the major barriers schools and parents face when trying to improve parental involvement in high-poverty schools.

Exhibit 7
Several Barriers Make It Difficult for Low-Income Parents and High-Poverty Schools to Improve Parental Involvement in Their Children's Education

Examples of Parent-Related Barriers to Parental Involvement	Examples of School-Related Barriers to Parental Involvement
Limited Time: Low wages may force some parents to work more than one job, thus limiting their involvement in learning activities at home. **Limited Financial Resources**: Limited financial resources may reduce low income parents' ability to create a supportive home learning environment or to provide materials their children need to be successful in school. **Cultural Obstacles**: For some immigrant populations, it is culturally inappropriate for parents to interact with school officials or educators or to raise questions about school events. As a result, these parents may be reluctant to initiate contact with schools. **Limited Ability/Skills**: In many cases, low-income parents may not possess adequate educational skills or abilities to help teach or tutor their children at home.	**Narrow Concept**: Teachers and principals may view parental involvement primarily in terms of attendance at parent-teacher conferences and other formal school meetings, which may prevent them from pursuing other types of parental involvement. **Individual Attitudes**: Some school administrators and teachers may undervalue parental involvement from low-income or non-traditional families. **Lack of Training/Preparation**: Teachers and school administrators may not know how to effectively involve parents in school or instructional activities.

Source: OPPAGA analysis of school site visit information.

Some Schools Have Taken Steps to Improve Low-Income Parents' Involvement

School- and Home-Based Strategies Are Being Used in Some Schools to Foster Parental Involvement

Principals and teachers at the high-poverty schools we visited reported they were attempting to minimize barriers to parental involvement through a variety of initiatives and strategies. These include both school-based strategies and home-based strategies. School-based strategies include creating school advisory councils, parent-teacher conferences, and family resource rooms to encourage parents to come into schools. Home-based strategies include providing video-taped instructional lessons that students may take home or requiring principals and teachers to visit students and parents in their homes. Exhibit 8 provides additional examples of school-based and home-based strategies for facilitating the different types of parental involvement. Although the schools we visited were trying these strategies, their principals and teachers still felt that parental involvement needed to be greatly improved.

Exhibit 8

Schools Can Implement a Variety of Strategies to Help Facilitate Parental Involvement

Type of Parental Involvement	Home-Based Strategies (Examples) Does not require parent to come to school; information or materials sent home	School-Based Strategies (Examples) Requires parents to come to the school; activities held at schools
Parenting, Assisting in Teaching, Learning at Home	• Information for parents suggesting home conditions that support learning • Information packets for families on skills required for students in all subjects and how parents can assist students to improve those skills • Videotapes, computerized phone messages on parenting, child rearing in general, or on specific areas of instruction that a child will be covering • Home visitations by teachers or principals • Referral information to assist families with health, nutrition, and other services	• Family math, science, and reading nights to help improve parent skills • Parent education and other courses or training for parents (e g , GED, family literacy) • Family resource rooms at schools where parents can come on weekends and at nights to help their child with homework and other learning activities
Communicating (Home-School)	• Weekly or monthly folders of student work sent home for review and comment • Calendars with information about school and community activities • Regular schedule of notices, memos, phone calls, and newsletters pertaining to school activities • Positive phone call program where teachers regularly call student's parents to relay positive information about their child's activities and behaviors	• Parent-teacher conferences held on an as needed basis • Parent-teacher conferences held on a predetermined schedule such as once a month • Open houses involving food and refreshment to share information about school programs and activities • Language translators available at school to assist families as needed
Volunteering	• Annual postcards to identify potential volunteers and their talents	• School and classroom parent volunteer program to help teachers, administrators, students, and other parents (e.g., tutoring, grading papers) • Parent patrols or other activities to aid school safety and other operations
Decision Making (advisory)	• Needs assessment surveys	• Parental involvement opportunities on School Advisory Councils • Active PTO/PTA or parent organizations • Parent participation on site-based decision making teams

Source: OPPAGA analysis of school site visit information

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Conclusions and Recommendations

The 1996 Florida Legislature emphasized the importance of parental involvement for student performance by establishing a state education goal for parental involvement. In high-poverty schools, limited parental involvement is a major impediment to improving student performance. Although some schools are initiating efforts to involve parents in their children's education, principals and teachers at most of the schools we visited believed that parental involvement at their school needed to be greatly improved. Thus, we believe that the state should revise current school improvement and accountability mechanisms to ensure that schools are initiating efforts to minimize the barriers to parental involvement that may exist in high-poverty schools. Specifically, we recommend that the Legislature and State Board of Education:

- Require schools to identify barriers to involving parents as active partners in their children's education in the schools' Annual Needs Assessments;

- Require schools to describe the programs they have initiated to facilitate parental involvement in their Annual School Reports; and

- Establish performance measures for different types of parental involvement and require schools and school districts to collect and report data for these measures.[7] Such measures could include the number and type of parental outreach programs school implement, attendance rates at parent teacher conferences, and the number of hours parents work in volunteer activities.

In addition, to help address school-related barriers to facilitating parental involvement, we recommend the State Board of Education and the Department of Education revise professional preparation requirements to ensure that teachers have the knowledge and skills necessary to effectively facilitate different types of parental involvement.[8]

[7] The Florida Commission on Education Reform and Accountability is in the process of developing additional indicators for the state's parental involvement goal

[8] An Educator Contracts and Performance Task Force appointed by Commissioner Brogan in 1995 made a similar recommendation for the inclusion of parental involvement as a requirement for the preparation of teachers

4 **School principals who exhibit strong leadership behaviors and consistently focus on improving student performance can make a difference in the performance of high-poverty schools. While some Florida school districts have taken the initiative in considering student performance in their evaluation of principals, there is currently no legislative requirement that district school boards do so.**

With the growing emphasis on school improvement and accountability in education, the principal's role in improving student performance is receiving greater attention. The Legislature recognizes that principals are the administrative and instructional leaders of public schools and that strong, competent principals can improve public schools. Recent studies also stress the importance of the principal's leadership role in establishing effective schools. School districts in Florida and around the nation are changing their principal selection and retention methods to focus more on accountability for student outcomes.

Leadership Behaviors of Principals Identified as Change Agents

Leadership by Principals Is Critical to Improving School Performance

Effective school principals exhibit many behaviors associated with improving student performance. Specifically, principals at the higher-performing schools we visited and those characterized as effective change agents:

- Provide strong leadership focusing on student outcomes;
- Demonstrate strong commitment to accountability for self, teachers, and students;
- Establish high but realistic expectations for teachers and students;
- Ensure that student performance is monitored;
- Focus on instruction and instructional improvements;
- Provide support for teachers and students;
- Implement vigorous selection and replacement of teachers, as needed;
- Provide a safe, orderly environment; and
- Promote meaningful change.

Principals Who Set High Expectations Can Make a Difference

When principals exhibit these leadership behaviors, student performance is likely to improve. In the high-poverty schools we visited, school staff at the higher-performing schools typically reported that their principals demonstrated these behaviors. These staff indicated that their principals provide opportunities for and expect high student performance. In contrast, at many of the lower-performing schools we visited, fewer school staff reported that their principals exhibited these leadership and managerial behaviors.

In addition, school staff described specific strategies implemented by principals who exhibit strong leadership behaviors. Exhibit 9 describes the leadership behaviors of principals, samples of strategies principals use to implement these behaviors, and specific examples of principals' actions aimed at improving student performance.

Many High-Poverty Schools Have Changed Principals to Improve Performance

School districts appear to recognize the importance of the principal as a change agent. In 9 of the 17 lower-performing schools we visited, school districts had recently changed principals in an attempt to improve student performance. These principals have taken steps to bring about instructional, personnel, and program changes to create an environment in which all students can learn and perform well. In most instances, school staff reported that these new principals typically demonstrated the leadership behaviors associated with improving student performance. Many of these principals appear to be having a significant impact. Although these principals had been at their present school less than two years, school staff described numerous changes these new principals initiated that have improved student and teacher performance. The principals and staff of these schools were determined to get off and stay off the "critically low" list.

Some Districts Are Making Principals Accountable for Performance

Realizing the importance of the principal's role in improved student performance, some school districts are changing their selection and retention programs to focus more on the principal's accountability for student performance. This is critical at high-poverty schools where student performance has been consistently low and a wide gap exists between performance and expectations. In discussing the principal's role in improving student performance, three of the districts we visited specifically mentioned that in order to advance, principals must now show results as measured through students' test performance. These school districts include student performance in the principal's annual evaluation. The districts may transfer, demote, or dismiss principals if students do not show adequate progress.

Exhibit 9
Effective Principals at High-Poverty Schools Exhibit Specific Leadership Behaviors and Implement Strategies to Improve Student Performance

Behavior of Principal	Implementation Strategies	Examples of Actions
Provides strong leadership focusing on student outcomes	• Develops school-wide plan for improving performance • Implements specific strategies to help each student achieve • Demonstrates constancy in purpose—to improve student performance	The principal reviews all lesson plans to ensure teachers incorporate Florida Benchmarks and strategies for reaching those standards.
Demonstrates strong commitment to accountability for self, teachers, and students	• Communicates vision to stakeholders, stressing high, but realistic expectations for faculty and students • Ensures teachers and students strive to meet established standards • Holds teachers accountable for student performance • Does not magnify obstacles or blame outsiders to justify failure to improve	The principal requires teachers to set student performance and professional goals, helps them develop a plan for accomplishing those goals, provides the necessary resources, and then holds them accountable for reaching those goals.
Establishes high but realistic expectations for teachers and students	• Instills the belief throughout the school environment, from teacher to student, that all students can learn at high levels regardless of their socioeconomic or cultural background	The principal received a waiver revising the school's grading policy to require students to master 75% of the Benchmarks before moving to the next grade level.
Ensures that student performance is monitored	• Ensures that student performance is monitored periodically using various assessment strategies • Uses school, district, and state assessment results to assist teachers in planning for instruction • Establishes specific procedures for determining a student's performance level, areas needing improvement, steps for addressing identified weaknesses, and whether academic outcomes have been achieved • Combines frequent informal classroom visits with constant personal supervision of school activities	The principal established a system for testing students at the beginning of the school year, analyzing the test results, and modifying the instructional plans to address specific deficiencies.
Focuses on instruction and instructional improvements	• Usually has classroom experience at the level to which he/she is assigned • Suggests appropriate instructional strategies, making program decisions that help improve academic performance	The principal conducted training sessions on the Florida Writes! Test, helped teachers develop a plan for improving writing skills, and participated in class writing activities with students.
Provides support for teachers and students	• Provides emotional encouragement and assistance in acquiring materials, funds, and other resources • Sets positive tone for improving student performance • 'Goes to bat' for good teachers, creating a trusting atmosphere in which teachers are willing to try innovative teaching strategies • Establishes reward mechanisms to recognize both student and teacher accomplishments	The principal sponsored a Breakfast Club for students and teachers to recognize their academic, behavior, or instructional accomplishments.
Implements vigorous selection and replacement of teachers, as needed	• Selects innovative teachers who work diligently to ensure high quality student performance • Provides counseling and training opportunities to teachers who may not be performing to standards • Transfers teachers identified as detracting from or not contributing to the effectiveness of the school	The principal makes it clear to teachers if they are not willing to work toward improving the academic performance of all students, the principal will request the district to reassign them.
Provides a safe orderly environment	• Establishes a consistent and well coordinated discipline program • Establishes clear rules that are understood by all, fairly and consistently enforced, and integrally connect the school and the classroom	The principal implemented a lunch detention program for students who have excessive discipline referrals.
Promotes meaningful change	• Changes existing practices, if needed, and implements more effective instructional approaches • Initiates innovative program changes that have a record of improving student performance • Encourages teachers to be creative, take risks, and do what works for their students, even if it means challenging district directives	The principal initiated a Social Skills program to improve student behavior so teachers could spend more time teaching and less time dealing with discipline problems.

Source: OPPAGA analysis of site visit information

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Conclusions and Recommendations

High-poverty schools face many challenges that require strong, proactive leaders. In the high-poverty schools we visited, principals who exhibit strong leadership and managerial behaviors have instituted changes to help their schools overcome the challenges they face. These principals made a difference by providing opportunities for and expecting increased student performance.

Principals should be held accountable for student outcomes. While some Florida school districts have taken the initiative in considering student performance in their evaluation of principals, there is currently no legislative requirement that district school boards do so. Therefore, we recommend that the Legislature and State Board of Education require school districts to adapt mechanisms for evaluating the principal's role in improving student performance in their principal evaluation and retention systems. We also recommend that the Department of Education provide technical assistance to school districts to ensure the districts' evaluation/retention systems for principals include mechanisms for evaluating the principals' role in improving student performance.

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Appendix A

Minimum Performance Criteria for Critically Low Schools

When both 1994-95 and 1995-96 scores fall below minimum criteria in a particular subject area, that subject is regarded as being critically low. When all three subject areas are below minimum criteria for both years (six data points), the school is identified as being critically low performing. The minimum performance criteria for each school level are listed below:

ELEMENTARY SCHOOLS

- Fewer than 33% scoring above the 50th percentile in Reading Comprehension;
- Fewer than 33% scoring above the 50th percentile in Math Concepts/Applications; and
- Fewer than 33% scoring "3" and above on Florida Writes!

MIDDLE SCHOOLS

- Fewer than 40% scoring above the 50th percentile in Reading Comprehension;
- Fewer than 40% scoring above the 50th percentile in Math Concepts/Applications; and
- Fewer than 50% scoring "3" and above on Florida Writes!

HIGH SCHOOLS

- Fewer than 85% passing the High School Competency Test (HSCT) in Communications;
- Fewer than 80% passing the HSCT in Mathematics; and
- Fewer than 67% scoring "3" and above on Florida Writes!

Appendix B

Some High-Poverty Schools Are Exploring Creative Ways to Use Resources to Meet Their Challenges

Resource	Challenge	Strategy (Examples From Schools Visited)
Fiscal	Need to find supplementary funding sources for implementing specific educational programs	• The Assistant Principal prepared numerous grant proposals, receiving sums of $250 to $8500 from private sponsors. • The school applied for and received an AmeriCorps grant providing tutors and mentors to help targeted students; work with teachers to assist students in class work and test-taking skills; provide an after-school program; and engage students' families in special events and workshops focused on school involvement.
	Need to expend available program resources in the most effective manner	• In selecting new educational programs to improve student performance, the principal solicits faculty input. However, before purchasing a specific program, teachers must show that the program has proven effective in improving student performance in similar high-poverty school settings.
Personnel	Not enough instructional assistance for students outside the classroom	• The school established a parent resource center where parents can check out materials and learn more about how to help their children learn.
	High pupil-teacher ratio	• The school reorganized the schedule designating 8:30-10:00 a.m. as the Language Arts Block for the entire school. This allowed team teaching in which each K-3 teacher has assistance from another certified teacher, and teachers in grades 4 and 5 have instructional aides. This instructional process reduced the pupil/teacher ratio, providing students opportunities for more instructional assistance.
	Need for additional teachers trained in best practices	• The district allowed the principal to select his own teachers. The principal seeks and recruits those teachers he believes are the most skilled in implementing best practices. This provides better instruction for students.
	To provide student with appropriate instruction to meet his/her individual needs	• The school implemented a 'looping' process in which a teacher remains with the same students for 3 years (K-2). Teachers do not waste instructional time trying to determine where each student left off the previous school year.
Time	Not enough time during the regular school day to provide remedial instruction for students, if needed	• The school implemented a modified school calendar allowing students additional after-school opportunities to correct their academic performance deficiencies.
	Not enough class time to focus on improving individual student's test-taking skills	• The media specialist programmed existing computers allowing students to develop their test-taking skills, according to their own needs.
	Not enough instructional time	• The school established a Social Skills program in which students are taught to be well-behaved and respectful. This allows teachers more uninterrupted time to teach.
		• The principal and administrative staff assumed non-instructional duties such as hall monitoring and clerical responsibilities to free more time for teachers to teach.

Source: OPPAGA analysis of school site visit information

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Appendix C

Schools We Visited Developed and Implemented Strategies Associated With High Expectations

Strategies and Actions Associated With High Expectations Behaviors	
Establish Strategies Consistent With High Expectations Behaviors	**Actions Taken At Schools Visited**
Exhibit the attitude that all students can attain high performance.	• Abolished basic-level classes so all students take advanced courses. • Implemented an advertising plan that includes posters asserting that all students can succeed. • Required students to master 75% of standards before promotion.
Initiate a variety of innovative programs to meet the students' needs.	• Introduced teaching Algebra skills at the kindergarten level. • Rewarded students for attendance by depositing "school bucks" into checking account so students can purchase school supplies.
Monitor student performance throughout the school year.	• Developed a tracking system that teachers use to identify students' performance level and modify instructional strategies.
Set standards that are challenging but realistic for all students.	• Established a student portfolio that includes standardized test scores, student goals, and a plan to accomplish goals. • Developed year-round calendar so all students will meet standards on time to complete grade level.
Recognize that students in high-poverty schools require additional resources.	• Committed specific staff resources to providing additional instruction in math and reading. • Volunteered (teachers') time before and after school hours to tutor students.
Realize the school needs the cooperation of parents and the community.	• Required teachers meet with parents at least once a month. • Developed videos of instructional topics students may take home for their parents. • Conducted home visits with parents.
Hold school administrators, teachers, parents, and students accountable for high student performance.	• Included student performance as one criteria for teacher evaluations. • Developed school contract outlining responsibilities of principal, teachers, parents, and students.

Source: Developed by OPPAGA staff from interviews of school staff.

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Appendix D

Response From the Department of Education

In accordance with the provisions of s. 11.45(7)(d), F.S., a list of preliminary and tentative review findings was submitted to the Commissioner of Education for his review and response.

The Department's written response is reprinted herein beginning on page 24.

FLORIDA DEPARTMENT OF EDUCATION
Frank T. Brogan
Commissioner of Education

April 22, 1997

Robert L. Bedford
Deputy Commissioner for
Educational Programs

Mr. John W. Turcotte, Director
Office of Program Policy Analysis and
Government Accountability
Room 312, Claude Pepper Building
Tallahassee, Florida 32301

Dear Mr. Turcotte.

I am writing in response and support of your forthcoming report: **Improving Student Performance in High-Poverty Schools**, a revised draft of which was delivered April 21, 1997. In general, our own research supports the central thesis that schools with high concentrations of students from low income families face severe challenges in terms of raising and/or maintaining high levels of student performance. As your report pointed out, the vast majority of "critically" low performing schools are also high poverty schools. On the other hand, we have identified and show-cased a number of high poverty schools where student performance is at or above state averages.

Since high poverty schools already receive extra financial resources, we agree that "simply providing more resources is unlikely to solve performance problems." Though your report does not deal directly with ways to reduce the impact of high poverty concentrations in schools, we certainly agree that setting high expectations for students, rewarding principals who focus their leadership on student performance and facilitating parent involvement will help to overcome its debilitating influence. We would also maintain that a safe and orderly learning environment is necessary to promote improved student performance.

The Department of Education currently sponsors or supports a number of in-service training and related activities that feature these and other correlates of student performance. Rather than mandating their adoption, our efforts are focused on identifying and sharing successful practices which predictably include the factors mentioned above. As well, we actively pursue research that analyzes factors associated with high student performance.

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In closing, once again I would like to acknowledge the important contribution of this report to the ever growing body of studies that highlight the impact of poverty concentration on school performance.

Sincerely,

Robert L. Bedford
Deputy Commissioner for Educational
Programs

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OPPAGA Mission Statement

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